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ABSTRACT

Aspects of professional competence and professional socialization that are being emphasized in professional education programs are summarized. Of concern are generic outcomes of professional preparation, outcome-related issues and trends common to professional education in diverse fields, some problems that concern professional educators, and recommendations for future action and study. The generic outcomes include six aspects of professional competence: conceptual competence, technical competence, contextual competence, interpersonal communication competence, integrative competence, and adaptive competence. Five attitudinal outcomes are also addressed: career marketability, professional identity, professional ethics, scholarly concern for improvement of the profession, and motivation for continued learning. The issues and trends concerning these outcomes were drawn primarily from recent articles in educational journals of 12 professional fields: architecture, business administration, dentistry, education, engineering, journalism, law, library science, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and social work. (SW)

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Enrollments in college programs that prepare students for professional occupations remain strong. At the undergraduate level, they now have surpassed enrollments in liberal studies programs. It seems clear that students will continue to select collegiate programs with promise of professional employment, yet many educators believe such programs are inappropriately narrow and specialized. In truth, few attempts have been made to examine the intended outcomes of professional preparation programs to determine whether these beliefs are justified. An initial step in bringing educational philosophies and curricular outcomes into better alignment is to clarify the goals and dilemmas of educators in professional programs. Is it true that professional educators concentrate on technical skills and devalue broader aspects of their students' education? If so, is this posture more characteristic of some fields than of others? What commonalities and distinctions of professional preparation programs are most important for faculty members and administrators to understand? Can better understanding of common issues faced by professional educators help identify ways in which faculty and administrators can foster educationally effective interprogram collaboration? What research models, with appropriate modifications, can be used to explore the achievement of outcomes in diverse professional programs?

While this report does not answer all of these important questions, it takes a first step toward improving understanding of intended outcomes in various fields of professional preparation by identifying several competences and attitudes that are generic outcomes of professional study, by exploring the emphasis professional educators believe should be placed on these outcomes, by summarizing outcome-related issues and trends common to professional education in diverse fields, and by providing some recommendations for the future.

The generic outcomes described in the report were derived from existing literature about professional education. They include six aspects of professional competence — conceptual competence, technical competence, contextual competence, interpersonal communication competence, integrative competence, and adaptive competence — and five attitudinal outcomes — career marketability, professional identity, professional ethics, scholarly concern for improvement of the profession, and motivation for continued learning.

The issues and trends concerning these outcomes identified in the report are drawn primarily from recent articles in the educational journals of 12 professional fields: architecture, business administration, dentistry, education, engineering, journalism, law, library science, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and social work.

The synthesis of the literature should be helpful to three audiences: (1) college and university administrators seeking better comparative understanding of professional preparation programs; (2) professional program and liberal arts faculty members desiring to facilitate interprogram collaboration; and (3) researchers seeking to address a variety of related issues, particularly documentation of the outcomes of professional study.

What Aspects of Professional Competence Are Educators Discussing?

Professional educators devote considerable attention to field-specific aspects of professional competence, such as foundational knowledge and technical skills. Yet, within these two areas, educators in

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diverse fields are addressing some common issues. All fields are reviewing program purposes, curricular validity, the role of foundational courses, and the volume of conceptual and technical material students must learn. Such reviews have common origins in the rapid growth of specialized knowledge, changing practice roles, including application of new technologies and response to new socio-economic conditions, and increasing responsiveness to a broader range of clients. Across fields, concern also is apparent for better ways to cultivate cognitive problem-solving skills.

Although literature in the educational journals more heavily emphasizes the development of technical competence, faculty members in professional fields judge technical competence of graduates to be slightly less, rather than more, deserving of emphasis than conceptual competence. Additionally, faculty strongly believe that students should understand the social, cultural, and economic context within which professional practice occurs. While such a contextual emphasis is more widely espoused in "helping" and "informing" professional programs than in "enterprising" programs (like business, architecture, and engineering), all fields are questioning whether traditional liberal arts is the best curricular vehicle for its achievement. Particularly as they attempt to serve diverse client populations, the helping and informing programs are rapidly infusing social science content into their professional courses to ensure its relevance to professional concerns. Although traditional written and oral communication remains important, communication skills required of new professionals now are conceived more broadly to include interpersonal relations with colleagues and relationships with clients. In four-year undergraduate fields where expansion of the knowledge base has already crowded the curriculum, this desire for broad education is difficult to implement.

In all fields, the nature and function of simulated or real experiences that assist students to integrate concepts, skills, contextual knowledge, and interpersonal skills into competent professional judgments are being actively debated. Fields with formal field experiences are grappling with similar problems of supplying appropriate field supervision, ensuring adequate role modeling, providing feedback to students, and maintaining good relationships with practitioners. Discussion of these curricular management issues appears to overshadow the need to define more clearly the outcomes of field and clinical placements. Perhaps because little is known about the learning process through which integration takes place, professional educators seem to link quite loosely the processes and intended outcomes of integrative field experiences.

What Aspects of Professional Socialization Are Educators Discussing?

Development of accepted profesional attitudes and commitment, that is, professional socialization, is of greatest concern to educators in health and in human and information service fields and of less importance to educators in fields like architecture, business, engineering, and law. Even when professional educators express strong interest in fostering attitudes like long-term career awareness, professional identity, and ethical standards, discussions primarily focus on providing opportunities for these attitudes to develop. Articulating and measuring such attitudes are discussed very little. Nonetheless, some professional fields can provide useful examples for other educators. To illustrate, educators in dentistry, accounting, and social work are developing new models of career guidance; nursing educators pay particular attention to making preservice students aware of needs for continuing education and research to improve professional practice.

Writers in professional education journals exhort their colleagues concerning the need for students to internalize accepted ethical standards. Despite such rhetoric, little consensus is apparent in most fields about what these standards are and how best to teach them. Social work, nursing, and law educators feel they have incorporated professional ethics in their curricula, but at the same time, law educators as well as journalism and business administration educators believe agreed-upon standards or codes do not exist.

Recommendations for the Future

This literature review and survey of professional education faculty found little evidence to support the view that educational outcomes are narrow in intent. To the contrary, professional education faculty are struggling to maintain, and even to initiate, curricular breadth that is relevant to developing professionals. Strong concerns about continually increasing curricular volume and related time constraints are coupled with a sense of unrest regarding the contribution of both traditional liberal arts courses and traditional professional foundations courses. Thus, opportunities are excellent for interprogram collaboration, particularly in courses that convey to students the importance of the social context in which the professions are practiced, the anticipated effect of technology on professional practice, and the need for broader interpersonal communication skills. College administrators should encourage such discussions of collaboration, as well as frank exchanges among liberal and professional education faculty about mutual needs and services. Joint problem solving among professional educators and between liberal arts and professional faculty may be productive in devising solutions to mutual problems of integrating theory and practice and in articulating more effectively the outcomes and processes generally thought of as professional socialization.

Several outcomes of professional education seem amenable to measurement. Yet because measurement largely has been restricted to field-specific conceptual and technical competence, professional educators seem to have foregone opportunities to demonstrate successful achievement of broad educational goals. The generic outcome framework used in this synthesis of the literature provides one vehicle that groups of professional educators might use for badly needed comparative research.

NOTE: This digest is a summary of ED 273 229

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